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How a Rural Healthcare System Stepped up Email Security

Columbus Regional Healthcare System touts its role in the Columbus County, North Carolina, community as "more than a hospital." That is how it got started, though: In 1935, a local physician opened a 12-bed hospital in a Victorian home in Whiteville, the county seat. The community's need for such a facility was immediately clear. Within a year, the home's porches had been enclosed to make room for more patients. The organization now consists of a modern 150-bed hospital, as well as 10 satellite medical clinics. Its services remain as vital to the local population as they were eight decades ago.

Remarkably, as a spate of other rural hospitals across the nation have either closed their doors or been absorbed into larger organizations, Columbus Regional has stayed independent. It is a point of pride for the organization's approximately 800 medical, administrative, and other staff members. Ed Duryee, Director of Information Systems, and his two-member IT security team recently found themselves exploring their email security options.

The Email Problem in Healthcare

Columbus Regional runs an on-premises Microsoft Exchange server. Protecting the organization against email-based threats such as ransomware is a top priority for the company, as it is for nearly every healthcare provider. "Things have changed in the past 12 months," Duryee says. "Our organization faces the same risks as everyone else. We are not unique in any way because of our size or location." As one industry publication recently put it: Healthcare has an email problem.

When their legacy email security solution approached end-of-life, Duryee and his colleagues knew it was time to seriously evaluate alternatives. "A little over a year ago, our contracts for email filtering and web filtering products were both coming to an end," he reports. "We engaged ePlus Technology [a Virginia-based technology consulting firm] to do some due diligence and run some demos. ePlus was incredibly helpful in the selection process."

Columbus Regional was simultaneously looking for best-of-breed security and streamlined management to suit its small staff. "We do not have multiple specialists in each area of security," Duryee says. "We have two individuals. They are highly trained, and they have areas of specialization, but they need to be able to cover for each other when necessary. So, efficiency and ease of management are very important for all our security solutions."

Number-One Good: Stronger Security

These decision criteria led Columbus Regional to Fortinet. With the help of ePlus, Duryee and his colleagues determined that FortiMail and FortiWeb would be the best fit for their email and web filtering needs. The solutions have greatly improved the company's security posture compared with its legacy solutions.

Columbus Regional
HEALTHCARE SYSTEM
More than a Hospital

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– Ed Duryee, Director of Information Systems, Columbus Regional Healthcare System

Details

Customer: Columbus Regional Healthcare System

Industry: Healthcare

Location: Whiteville, North Carolina

Business Impact

- Improved security across business-critical on-premises systems, including Microsoft Exchange

- Faster and more effective response to security incidents

- Reduced rates on cybersecurity insurance coverage

"FortiMail and FortiWeb offer much more powerful customization than the products we were using previously," Duryee explains. "As an example, we did not have the flexibility to block sites and groups with web filtering. But with Fortinet, we have 40 different categories we can block or unblock, and we can tailor those filters to individual roles. So, if we wanted to, we could now block social media for everyone except HR and marketing staff. That would have been impossible in our legacy environment."

The team also liked the fact that FortiMail and FortiWeb come from the same provider. "Some vendors just buy additional functionality," Duryee says. "Even though two products come from the same vendor, getting them to work together may be a significant challenge. That is not the case with Fortinet—Fortinet solutions work together almost seamlessly."

The fact that these and other Fortinet solutions are in the relevant Gartner Magic Quadrant and Gartner Market Guide reports was also a decision factor. "People on the periphery of technology understand the importance of the Gartner rating," Duryee explains. "Knowing that these products come from a highly rated and financially stable company increased the comfort level among our management team about investing in the Fortinet solutions."

Shortly after rolling out FortiMail and FortiWeb, Columbus Regional added a FortiGate Next-Generation Firewall. More recently, the company gained multifactor authentication capabilities by deploying FortiAuthenticator and FortiClient. The tight integration among all these security solutions accelerates the company's threat response and enhances mitigation in the event of a security alert.

Streamlined Management Improves Efficiency

Another benefit of tight integration among Fortinet products is the streamlined management that Duryee and his team were looking for. Columbus Regional rolled out FortiManager and FortiAnalyzer for day-to-day oversight of its Fortinet solutions. This gave the security team a great deal of visibility into their security infrastructure.

"We have examples where people in the organization received potential malware, and we've been able to immediately block future emails with those same characteristics, whether the issue is with the sender's country, domain, etc.," Duryee says.

The company was able to implement this significantly more robust security without adding staff, Duryee says. Moreover, because the user interface is similar across the Fortinet solutions, the learning curve was less steep.

"These products help us with our HIPAA security compliance, as well," Duryee adds. "We have to do a HIPAA security self-audit every year, and the Fortinet solutions make that self-reporting process easier and less time-consuming."

Business Impact (contd.)

- Easier compliance with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)

- More efficient security management through a minimal learning curve and the enhanced ability of security specialists to cover for each other

Solutions

- FortiMail

- FortiWeb

- FortiGate Next-Generation Firewall

- FortiManager

- FortiAnalyzer

- FortiClient

- FortiAuthenticator

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Fortinet Security Fabric: More Than the Sum of Its Parts

The new Fortinet-based security infrastructure has even lowered insurance rates for Columbus Regional. "Our cybersecurity insurance carrier knows we are using Fortinet products," Duryee says. "That gives them confidence in the quality of security for our key on-premises systems and has helped with our coverage rates.

"Cybersecurity insurance carriers have a great deal of experience in what security practices should be required, so we base our strategy on their guidelines," he adds. "In addition to the Fortinet technologies, we have followed our insurer's recommendations around employee education and worked with ePlus on training our front-line workers. ePlus really helped our employees understand how to safely use email."

In one instance since deployment, Columbus Regional engaged Fortinet Professional Services to help with response to a security incident. "The Fortinet team were very prompt and thorough," Duryee reports. "We were very pleased with how they supported our organization."

Columbus Regional is invaluable in supporting the health and well-being of Columbus County residents. And, ultimately, Duryee sees Fortinet as invaluable in helping his organization meet the needs of the community. "Fortinet is a true partner to Columbus Regional," he concludes. "The value of this relationship is much more than the sum of benefits of the individual pieces of technology. Among our different technology vendors, I put Fortinet at or near the top."

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